PHILIP LARKIN

AND

THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

Andrew McKeown

and

Charles Holdefer, eds.

Paris: L'Harmattan

2006

excerpt pp. 67-80

Camping With Larkin

Charles Holdefer

The above title sounds like an episode that somehow escaped Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin, perhaps a nightmare holiday that the poet spent with his mother and Monica Jones in a leaky tent in Scotland. Actually, it refers to something *textual*.

Camp is an elusive idea, usually defined in terms of its celebration of the outlandish or banal, and for the theatricality with which this affection is expressed. Historically, it has often been linked with homosexuality. How it functions in Larkin's poetry and how one celebrates the outlandish and banal under the same banner are two immediate and obvious questions; moreover, its homosexual aspect is by no means a given (Cleto 1999, 33). To describe a text as camp is also to engage in a certain type of reading. In camp, the disassociation of signs from their usual meanings, this resistance of the text, is not a subject for worried conceptualizations along the lines of "How do we deal with this problem?" On the contrary, camp does not see a problem. The play of surfaces is the point.

Interest in camp has tended to gravitate toward film and fashion, no doubt because the visceral power of the image lends itself well to such play. More abstract media such as literature and music make other kinds of demands,

but camp can be encoded nonetheless (Sontag 1964, 55). Still, as Fabio Cleto has observed,

> the slipperiness of camp has constantly eluded critical definitions and has proceeded in concert with the discursive existence of camp itself. Tentatively approached as *sensibility, taste,* or *style,* reconceptualized as *aesthetic* or *cultural economy,* and later asserted/ reclaimed as *(queer) discourse*, camp hasn't lost its relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability [...] [It is] a discursive resistance, a semiotic excess, which indeed translates directly into an exhuberent, virtually inexhaustible camp corpus of reference (Cleto 1999, 2, 3).

There is one constant, however: to notice and appreciate this resistance and excess requires an initiated onlooker. This onlooker accords camp what Andrew Ross calls its "pseudoaristocratic patrilineage" which places it above lower forms like kitsch or schlock (Ross 1988, 316). In this sense, camp is *exclusive.* Larkin himself made a claim for this sort of knowing eye in one of his periodic defenses of John Betjeman, referring to the latter's "High Church camp" (*RW* 206).

Reading Larkin in light of camp can be useful because it provides a way to bring together some of his seeming contradictions as a writer. Camp informs not only his work as the pseudonymous Brunette Coleman, in her arch, lesbian schoolgirl novels, but also, perhaps less obviously at first, in his later persona as the Very English Curmudgeon of Hull. In the two decades since his death, critics have written about a multitude of Larkins. He is both toad and dreamer, sensitive and reactionary, Jekyl and Hyde. Male, female; homosexual, heterosexual, asexual. All these, from a writer who responded to the glowing reviews of *The Whitsun Weddings* by remarking, "Once I have said that the poems were written in or near Hull, Yorkshire, with a succession of Royal Sovereign 2B pencils during the years 1955 to 1963, there seems little to add" (*RW* 83).

This claim is more than disingenuous, more than a means of protecting himself from certain kinds of scrutiny. It is a theatrical, campy pose which allows a rather serious man to sound like Droopy, the cartoon dog. For Larkin, it is not exceptional, either, but symptomatic. My interest here is to underline how much masking and a sense of theatricality inform his life's work — the early poems, the novels, and the mature collections — and to point out instances where Larkin, arguably, is camping. It seems obvious that the writer travelled a long way between juvenalia like *Trouble at Willow Gables* and his last collection of poetry, *High Windows,* but I would like to question this very obviousness, and suggest that in some respects, Larkin made a circle.

At the same time, I'm not arguing the pre-eminence of this particular mask over others, or claiming that it is somehow closer to the "real" Larkin. I agree with István Rácz that "What is the mask?" is a more relevant question than "Who is behind the mask?" (Rácz 2000, 225). A mask hides and protects, but it is also a means of expression. All artists depend on masks — indeed, all language is performative (Swarbrick 1997). But there are occasions when a writer's theatricality takes over the performance, and qualifies as campy. Camp sensibility is very compatible with some of Larkin's attitudes, for it resists ready-made discourses of truth, while at the same time expressing a longing for them.

Inevitably, we begin with Brunette. As is now well-known, Larkin wrote lesbian schoolgirl novels during his Oxford days, under the pseudonym of Brunette Coleman. A detailed discussion of her work (which also includes poetry, the essay, and a biographical fragment) goes beyond the scope of this article, but there can be little doubt that Brunette represents a familiar face of camp: arch, bitchy and transvesticized. Full of double-entendres and mock-

seriousness, this is a kind of literature that is resolutely about itself, basking in its own self-reflexivity, while at the same time implying a challenge to varieties of literature that seek to do otherwise. On occasion the challenge is made explicit: Brunette's wartime essay 'What Are We Writing For?' is a manifesto of sorts which breezily dismisses George Orwell and his politically engaged writing as "ephemeral chatter" (Larkin as Coleman 1943/2002, 256). And elsewhere, in an introductory statement to a group of poems entitled 'Sugar and Spice,' Brunette observes, "I make no apology for presenting a collection of what may seem 'trivia' in these disturbed times. I feel that now more than ever a firm grasp on the essentials of life is needed" (Larkin as Coleman 1943/2002, 243). Here we find a clear echo of one of camp's patron saints, Oscar Wilde. The "trouble" alluded to in the title of *Trouble at Willow Gables* is ostensibly the theft of a £5 note and the ensuing questions of friendship and moral responsibility, but the real point of the story is to conjure up a titillating world of unchaste hugs and hockey sticks.

Critics have speculated about how Brunette might reflect Larkin's personal sexual development (Motion 1993, Rowe 2000, Booth 2002). Themes of bondage and sadomasochism further complicate the picture. Instead of this psychological aspect, however, I would like to emphasize that certain features of the text (e.g., obsessive references to Marie's hips) add up to a strategy of representation which attempts to go *beyond* parody. Parody is mainly about its referent, a mode for raillery or mockery; whereas here Larkin offers a form that is as much about itself as its referent, and is not only teasing but also, paradoxically, celebrating its subjects. (Including — especially — Marie's hips.) That is what makes it camp. Camp does not only point its finger: it pirouettes, too.

After his Brunette phase, however, Larkin's affinity for such turns wanes. For the next several decades, although

one finds many of the same ingredients in his work, Larkin seems to foreclose on the possibility of them coming together with both the distance and playfulness of camp. In *The North Ship* (1945), 'Ugly Sister' is a mask but its sober, contemplative tone is straight, not jesting; the speaker of the untitled poem XX ('I see a girl dragged by the wrists') fantasizes about being the girl but at the same time broods and ultimately settles for a more prosaic identification with two ragged men shoveling snow. Introspection of this sort vitiates theatricality and the pleasure of surfaces, and as a consequence, camp is not possible.

This tendency is confirmed in much of Larkin's subsequent writing. If the main narrator of *Jill* (1946) is largely self-effacing, the narrator of *A Girl in Winter* (1947) is more impersonal still. In *Jill,* the sections ostensibly written by John Kemp offer a mannered ventriloquism; in *Winter,* Katherine possesses a theatrical sense of her existence ("It was as if the world had been turned round, like innumerable bits of reversible stage scenery" (Larkin 1947/1988, 181) — but there is none of the posing, and very little of the preening, of the Wildean sort.

The same is true of *The Less Deceived* (1955). The speakers try on a multitude of masks — among them a woman ('Wedding-Wind', 'Deceptions'); a wage slave ('Toads'); a child ('I Remember, I Remember'); or a community ('Arrivals, Departures') — but their primary function is to allow the speaker to hold forth on a variety of subjects, and not to revel in their own constructedness. In poems where the mask itself is the subject, ('Skin' or 'Latest Face'), the tone is morose, not celebratory. More significantly, there is also a heightened awareness of the role that language plays in creating what we see. Language *is* the mask in a poem like 'Poetry of Departures', but instead of enjoying the factitiousness, the speaker despairs. Worse still is the situation in 'If, My Darling', where the speaker

glimpses what lies on the other side of his mask, and finds both "meaning and meaning's rebuttal" (*CP* 41). Language resists being pinned down, and its resistance to durable signification leaves the speaker at a loss for consolation. Camp, in contrast, would enjoy the predicament, with delectation.

A shift, though, is palpable in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). And to better understand this shift, it is necessary to consider more broadly the purposes of camp, and to remember that flamboyance is only a means, not an end. According to Richard Dyer, camp "holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity [...] intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity" (Dyer 1986, 154).

Dyer is speaking of a specifically gay context, but his observation can be generalized too, because this last description, *a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity,* informs much of Larkin's later poetry. *The Whitsun Weddings* is an altogether more intense work than *The Less Deceived,* and though not camp in itself, it prepares for a return to a camp sensibility by questioning its masks more strenuously, and by creating a space for consolation.

In *The Whitsun Weddings,* masks inspire more than dissatisfaction: they are frequently subject to violence. One thinks, for instance, of 'Send No Money', with its reference to "the bestial visor, bent in / by the blows of what happened to happen" (*CP* 146); or of the ferocity with which faces of femininity and consumerism are attacked in 'Sunny Prestatyn' and 'Essential Beauty'. There is no shortage of deprecation, either, as in 'A Study of Reading Habits', 'Wild Oats' or, more poignantly, in 'Mr Bleaney,' to name but a few. Most interesting, though, is the intimation of feelings in addition to the frustration dramatized in

earlier works. On occasion Larkin's speaker seems to find consolation in contemplating something *beyond* language, as at the end of 'Here,' with its lyric landscape of "unfenced existence: / facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach." And elsewhere, the speaker is more accepting of limitations, as in 'An Arundel Tomb', which celebrates an image of love, while underlining its falsity. The climatic concluding line ("What will survive of us is love") has been earlier characterized as "untruth". According to the speaker, "Only an attitude remains" (*CP* 111). But this time, it has become worthy in its own right. Too bad about the truth, he seems to be saying, *but isn't that attitude beautiful?*

On its own, 'An Arundel Tomb' is light-years away from camp (instead of a gleeful "Look-at-me!", there is a rather sober "Look-at-them"). But it marks an important step, for it is a return to an intense appreciation of the beauty of surfaces. It is a response that is not angry or mocking or despairing, but a celebration of artifice.

In *High Windows* (1974), the last collection published in Larkin's lifetime, camp makes its reappearance, even if, to date, it has not been described as such. Unquestionably the ferocity and deprecation are even more marked in this work, and so are the positions it stakes out in regard to language. At one extreme the speaker of the title poem yearns for something "Rather than words", a state beyond known means of expression. At the other extreme there is a set piece like 'The Card-Players' where the language, via characters like "Old Prijck" and "Dirk Dogstoerd", strives to be sufficient unto itself, a two-dimensional surface like the 17th century Dutch painting it parodies.

I would argue that these two extremes are not antithetical. Rather, the former *enables* the latter. Now that the speaker aspires to a greater distance, he is able to profit from this remove by enjoying the surface meanings around him; he feels less compelled to rail against them. "Two ontological modes of existence which are seen as

reciprocally exclusive — integrity and theatricality of selves — can thus be brought to co-exist and to fundate each other" (Cleto 1999, 28). In some of the most memorable poems in *High Windows*, the ingredients of camp, present in earlier work but diffused or diluted, are allowed to coalesce. For the first time since the days of Brunette Coleman, the artist "goes camping." Only this time, he wears a different sort of drag, something curmudgeonly instead of callow, a mask that is an extension of the personae his speakers had been evolving toward over the years. Stodgy becomes stagy in a camp mask that is Very Male, Very Much the Loner, and Very English. It's the Humberside Droopy — and the reader had better be careful, because he bites. This mask appears in poems such as 'Posterity', 'Annus Mirabilis', 'The Card-Players', 'Vers de Société', and 'This Be The Verse'. Each deserves to be examined in light of camp:

In 'Posterity', Jake Balokowsky provides an American foil for the speaker's self-sufficient Englishness; and to drive the point home further, the emphasis on Balokowsky's Jewishness, and details like his use of the "money sign", might imply an Englishness on the part of the speaker with some rather ugly overtones, a fact not lost on Larkin's American publisher, Robert Giroux (Motion 1993, 436). But at the same time, one can note how much the poem emphasizes the artificiality of what passes for identity: in the famous last line, Jake refers to the speaker as "One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys" (*CP* 170). The italicization of *natural* calls attention to its own constructedness. By flaunting the mask, Larkin demystifies it.

This is a classic camp gesture, supported by the general tone of the poem, which suggests that the speaker is not troubled about this description of himself, but is revelling in it. One is reminded of Susan Sontag's observation that "Camp sees everything in quotation marks [...] To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-As-

Playing-a-Role" (Sontag 1964, 56). Indeed, *both* Larkin's admirers and detractors would probably concur that his poetic persona IS very much an "old-type *natural* fouled-up guy" — and, more pertinently in regard to camp, the persona in this poem is conscious of this perception of his sexual identity, and he is encouraging it, hamming it up.

'Annus Mirabilis' is just as theatrical, with its well-known pronuncimiento about sexual intercourse beginning too late for him, in 1963, "Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / And the Beatles' first LP" (*CP* 167). Andrew Motion dutifully points out that this is not true at all, because there was Ruth Bowman in October 1945, etc. (Motion 1993, 338). I would like to argue that such biographical speculations, however well-informed, risk distracting the reader from an interesting point. An old-bachelor prudishness about sex (which, incidentally, was not a characteristic of Larkin himself) is itself a highly sexualized pose. As Steve Clark has observed, "Sexuality is never the source of personal authenticity in Larkin" (Clark 1997, 96; see also Rossen 1989). Moreover, if we can stay closer to the text and consider the mask for its own sake, we can notice that here, "the Larkin Loner", who appeared in many earlier poems in cramped, domestic situations (e.g., 'Mr Bleaney'), finds himself performing on a larger stage, along with D.H. Lawrence and the Beatles, in front of the backdrop of History. The self-justification or inner griefs that characterized earlier Larkin Loners are absent, and have been replaced by an accepting self-regard. One can also note a development in camp narratives, compared to Larkin's early days. For Brunette Coleman, at the end of the story, the girl got the girl. For the Larkin Loner, however, the special sweetness of illicit pleasure isn't an option. Rather, it is as if the sensibility of Oscar Wilde has been supplanted by the aura of another camp icon: the Queen Mother. (1963 was too late for her, too — at least in the camp *reading* of her, that perceives an over-the-top,

larger-than-life figure, and enjoys it for that reason. Or, to put it another way: who needs a Beatle haircut, when you can wear such hats?)

At the same time, one should not exaggerate the distance between Brunette and the Larkin Loner, either. In 'What Are We Writing For?', Brunette seems to share some of the Loner's squeamishness, for instance in the observation that "we must construct a closed single-sexed world, which Mr Orwell would doubtless call a womb-replica, or something equally coarse" (Larkin as Coleman 1943/2002, 269). Almost 30 years later, this hermetic single-sexed world makes its reappearance in 'The Card-Players', which positively crows a conception of Maleness where spitting and belching and farting are elevated to an archetypal grandiosity of an altogether different magnitude than the schoolboy rites-of-passage in *Jill*, or the rueful musings of 'Wild Oats'. Instead of the quadrangle or the cathedral cities, we have the "lamplit cave". The prevailing forces aren't social but elemental: "Rain, wind and fire!" Instead of dissatisfaction, or the pain due to rejection by women, these men share a "secret, bestial peace!" (*CP* 177).

It is worth noting, too, that the implicit misogyny here ("hit[ting] the queen of hearts") is not just an attack, but a retreat. To put on this kind of maleness requires a distance in terms of time, space, and language, going beyond the reach of realistic convention. 'Vers de Société' shares some of these traits, too. At the social level, the feminine presence offers only "the drivel of some bitch / Who's read nothing but *Which*" (*CP* 181). One can add, however, that in this poem the males come off just as badly. For instance, we learn of the speaker's exasperation about "Asking that ass about his fool research". This speaker has little time for either sex. Although the fourth and fifth stanzas offer keen introspection, much of the poem is one, long curmudgeonly growl. The promise, "in a pig's arse, friend" is made as much to the reader as to the ostensible

addressee, Warlock-Williams. It is a surface contrivance, openly self-conscious about its effect. If this bluster, so insistently "male" and "vulgar", appears to be more than a pronouncement, but an imagined flexing of the speaker's verbal biceps in a polite parlor gathering, then it can be read as camp.

The same is true of 'This Be the Verse'. Larkin later carped about the fame of this poem, saying that it had generated too much emphasis on "four-letter Larkin. [...] 'They fuck you up' will clearly be my Lake Isle of Innisfree. I fully expect to hear it recited by a thousand Girl Guides before I die" (Motion 1993, 494). On the other hand, this reference to himself in the third-person underlines his self-consciousness about the poem's speaker. In life he was reluctant to make public appearances ("I don't want to go around pretending to be me" [*RW* 51]) though in interviews he was capable of effective "dramatic performance" (Motion 1993, 480). What is striking in 'This Be The Verse' is that Larkin offers a poem (that is, his most privileged space, compared to ephemera like readings or interviews) to the kind of performance he professed to loathe. Again, as in 'Annus Mirabilis', the speaker goes beyond the immediate and local and projects his silhouette onto the Big Picture, onto the history of humanity, with reference, even, to geologic time — whereupon he offers portentous advice: "Get out as early as you can / And don't have any kids yourself"(*CP* 180). In so many poems Larkin's speakers are uneasy about claims to even a *personal* truth; but here the speaker sets himself up as a sort of guru, dispensing his Loner Wisdom to others. Despair persists but it is partly mitigated by the pleasure of a camp pose.

Of course, readers might protest that I am projecting camp onto the text, that I see it because I want to see it. Or, one might approach the question from the other direction, and affirm that, even if nowadays some of these

late poems appear campy, Larkin intended nothing of the kind. Both of these objections deserve an answer.

The first point I readily concede, while asking: is it really a problem? Of course camp depends on the audience's perception; it is like any other horizon of expectations. Nothing is intrinsically or essentially camp; and, once perceived, it has no ready-made meaning, whether "subversive" or "apolitical and disengaged". People in the cultural studies industry have energetically enlisted camp on either side, but ultimately, the effect of a performance depends on its historical stratification (Cleto 1999, 34). This is not to say that anything goes — on the contrary, it invites readers to examine their positions. Above all, it underlines the degree to which the audience shares in the performance.

It is also true that Larkin's readers who are not English, such as myself, view the play of surfaces from a greater distance, and this fact inevitably affects our readings. Indeed, from a certain vantage point, "Englishness" itself becomes camp (see Ross 1988). But I'm not speaking so sweepingly here; rather, I'm applying the term only after making a number of qualifications. (And you don't have to be a foreigner to see the "Englishness" in this way: look at Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1999), which turns Albion into a campy theme park.)

The second argument, about whether or not Larkin intended these poems as camp, can be rejected as too restrictive, because it accords the writer a suspect monopoly on meaning. Need it be said again that literature cannot be reduced to the author's intentions? Nor do I agree with Susan Sontag's diametrically-opposed claim that unconscious camp is always better, because it is purer and more innocent (Sontag 1964, 58). Camp, of all sensibilities, ought to make one skeptical of appeals to authenticity. Although I detect a campy strut in some of Larkin's later poems, and I think that his keen pursuit of craft leaves little

room for serendipity, I can't *prove* his intentions. But, methodologically speaking, no reader should have to.

If there is an area where Larkin's Campy Curmudgeon seems, if not unconscious of his effect, then at least underestimating it, it is in his politics, which no one would describe as pure and innocent. Some of the misogyny in these poems, or the attitudes in racist ditties in his letters, are contrivances, calculated for effect. Still, having said this, he seems naive about their full implications. I'm not seeking excuses for him, and in any case biographical matters aren't my focus here, but Larkin may indeed have succumbed to the risk, described by George Orwell, of letting one's face grow into the mask (Orwell 1961, 19-20). Or, one might recall the odd episode of Larkin's 1961 nervous collapse, which put him in a hospital for weeks and which he absurdly blamed on a too-tight shirt and "rogue spectacles" (Motion 1993, 314). Larkin was no doctor but there's no doubting his ability to find an apt metaphor. As the speaker observed in 'Dockery and Son', a style can suddenly "harden into all we've got" (*CP* 153).

Ultimately, although one shouldn't exaggerate the extent of Larkin's later camping, it remains a significant facet of his work. The number of examples that I cite is modest, but it includes some of his most celebrated poems. It was no fluke or one-off. Rather, it was a return to a sensibility that he had already experimented with in his youth, and subsequently reformulated in a manner reflecting his development as an artist.

From his earliest days, even before writing as Brunette Coleman, Larkin was acutely self-conscious about masks. In an uncollected poem called 'Observation' (originally published in the unlikely-sounding *Oxford University Labour Club Bulletin*), the speaker announces: "[...] our only shape is death / When mask and face are nailed apart at last" (*CP* 264). Even in the juvenalia, Larkin's speakers are aware of

the ubiquity of masking, of its inevitability and tenaciousness. This poem claims that an alternative, something more "authentic", is not possible, except by an act of violence which the wearer will not survive.

But that's not necessarily a problem if, as in 'An Arundel Tomb', "untruth" is experienced as beautiful. Or, as in 'This Be the Verse', the unbeautiful is experienced as true. And, when we recognize in the latter case that not only the experience but a sense of its theatricality is celebrated, and the surface becomes a source of integrity and an end in itself — then, we can go camping with Larkin.